*The Value Creation School: A Concept Paper*

*The Committee of Concerned Educators, 1991*

Elsa Fernandez rushed up the front steps of the school with her four children close behind. It was 7:50 a.m. Above her hung a large banner, *“THE VALUE CREATION SCHOOL: DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR OUR CITY*.” She was meeting her friend, Serena Harris, at the school’s “Family Orientation Meeting” before going to work. Life was much less complicated now that her three children were enrolled in the same school close to her job. Each morning they traveled together across the city by bus. School started at 8:00 a.m., so Ms. Fernandez could take part in a parents’ activity, or meet with a teacher before getting to work by 9:00 a.m. The children had after-school activities and then met her after work at 5 p.m. so they could go home together**.**

The children ran to the playground where the entire school gathered for morning exercises. Candido, a 10th grader, was especially excited since it was his turn to lead the 4th graders. Mrs. Fernandez was glad the school helped the children develop a sense of citizenship by requiring them to be group leaders, peer tutors, serve lunch or clean up the school each day.

Elsa found Serena and her two sons, Jamel and Torean, looking at a large photo exhibit of students happily involved in various community activities. Last year, grades K-12 had worked together to clean up a nearby vacant lot and to plant a garden for local senior citizens. Other pictures showed students studying rock formations in Main Park, local marshlands, and irrigation methods in a surrounding rural area. There was also a picture of Elsa’s 5th grade daughter with her “Buddy” from the other side of the city. Class-to-class exchange programs begin in kindergarten and progress to foreign exchange in the upper grades.

Serena had lived in the neighborhood all her life and appreciated the positive effect The Value Creation School was having on her community, but she had never been very interested in school herself. She had just automatically enrolled her children in the local Public School. But after seeing Elsa’s children flourish in the caring and supportive environment of The Value Creation School, she decided to check it out.

Elsa and Serena quietly took their seats as the principal, Elizabeth Kelly, began describing the school’s basic purpose: “Our city is both historical and influential. For generations people have come to this city seeking a better life. Today, however, many say that our city is dying and that it lacks leadership and commitment to solve problems.

“Well, at The Value Creation School we don’t believe that for a minute! This is still a great city with great people, who given the opportunity, can restore it to its rightful place as the number one city in the world! As the song goes, ‘If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.’ To make it as a city, though, we need capable, committed, concerned individuals who want change; individuals who will foster a renaissance in their family, their neighborhood, or wherever it is needed in society.

“This is why The Value Creation School exists. You entrust us with your children’s education and together with you we will develop these young people to be the leaders of a new generation—a generation committed to creating value in their own lives and to the renaissance of our city. This is the purpose of our school. Every thought, word, and action here is guided by this vision. It frames all of our programs and decisions. Every moment we spend in school is vital and significant for the future of the city. We know it and so do our students.”

Serena felt something stir inside of her. “How wonderful,” she thought, “if my children and I can be part of such a positive and important undertaking.”

“Ms. Kelly,” a parent asked, “what is the curriculum at The Value Creation School?”

“That’s a very important question,” Ms. Kelly responded. “Thank you for asking. We have a unique academic program at our school. We have developed a coordinated instructional program from K-12 that employs the traditional academic disciplines to illuminate the theme of our city—its geography, people, culture—all the interrelated factors that helped create it. We make the study of the city the central unifying, integrating focus of our children’s education and relate academic subjects to the actual geographical, social, economic and political structures of their own neighborhoods and city. Students can gain ‘living knowledge,’ knowledge that is meaningful and useful, not the ‘dead knowledge’ they acquire when they study things unrelated to their own life and experience. ‘Dead knowledge’ will not prepare our children for success in today’s complicated world.

“We also feel that the purpose of education is to enable one to become a complete human being and to build a happy life. However, you cannot be complete if you don’t understand the interdependent relationships you have with other forms of nature in your ecosystem; or if you don’t appreciate the efforts of the countless people who struggled over time to lay the foundation for the way we live today. Everything in life is interrelated and interdependent. To live happy, productive lives our children must understand this so deeply that it becomes like breathing air.”

Lee Chin, a fifth grade teacher, interjected. “Let me give you a concrete example of what we’re talking about.” Lee displayed a transparency showing The Value Creation School and its surrounding neighborhood. “The Revolutionary army retreated under our windows. The Colonial House was headquarters for the British Army during the Revolutionary War. At the foot of the nearby park are Native American archaeological sites, and here you can see glacial potholes carved ten thousand years ago during the Ice Age. You can study the local river system, and both forest and marsh ecosystems.”

The audience was enraptured by Lee’s map and talk. “By the time children complete their elementary studies, they gain a thorough understanding of the geography, history, economics, and cultures of our city.”

Brenda Jimenez, the 9th grade social studies coordinator, spoke next. “In the middle grades our students study our city’s suburban and rural areas. This is not dry book learning. We are in the foothills of the mountains, up the river and on the ocean, on truck farms studying both the land and the people, always focusing on the interdependence of the parts to the whole and the introduction of new technology to the quality of life.”

Ms. Kelly added, “With this broad understanding as their foundation, our high school students delve more deeply into specific aspects of the economic and social life of our city and complete internships in communications, finance, information systems, agriculture, retailing and service industries.

“Their scope also opens to national and international perspectives. Every high school student becomes the ambassador of a country of the United Nations and studies that country in order to represent it in our mock United Nations forums. In some cases, students actually visit their country and get a firsthand perspective of its people and culture. We believe that our city, through its diverse population, is a microcosm of the world. When you learn about the history and culture of local people, you are actually learning about the history and culture of the entire world. There is an old saying, ‘If you know the taste of a drop of salt water, you know the taste of the entire ocean.’ With a deep understanding, knowledge and appreciation of their own city, our students can become not only ambassadors of our city, but also informed and responsible world citizens.”

One parent stood up. “Not to change the subject, but I can’t tell you how much time, energy, and worry I’ve spent trying to find the right school for my children. And the bigger the kid the bigger the worry.”

Donald Cuomo, a parent with three children in the school, nodded sympathetically. “That is what I like about one school housing grades K-12. Many good private schools are organized this way, but there is no other K-12 public school in the city. My children know what the school expects from them year to year. Very often they’re with the same teacher for two or more years. It’s impossible to hide or be anonymous here. Children feel safe and secure.”

Ken Green raised his hand. “That’s true. I’ve been a student at The Value Creation School for almost ten years. Everyone knows me around here. There is a supportive social structure which encourages you to do your best. Also, everything we study and do makes sense. It relates to my own life and that makes me care more. Nothing seems to be wasted—neither time nor effort. I never suffered ‘freshman shock’ or wasted a month or two each year waiting for the teachers to get to ‘know’ me so I could be placed in the right program. The academic program is very clear and understandable. My family gradually learned the workings of the school and how to support my studies. I learned the underlying message that school is important and what we do here counts.”

Tomoko Yamamoto, a seventh grader spoke next. “I started here in Kindergarten. From the beginning I learned to work in small groups with different kinds of people. I learned independence, self-reliance, responsibility and developed a lot of inner motivation. I think this is the greatest gift I’ve received from The Value Creation School. Very gradually and purposefully I was taught service skills and how to contribute to the community. I feel like ‘I saw, I studied, I conquered.’”

Other students and parents shared their experiences. Interspersed throughout the testimonials were frequent references to “Tier I” coursework, “Tier II” projects, and “Tier III” activities. Finally, a hand shot up. “Excuse me, but would you please explain about all these ‘tears’?”

Ms. Kelly smiled. “I would be happy to. Tiers are an important component of the innovative instructional program here at The Value Creation School. “Tier” refers to instructional or learning approaches that are incorporated into each grade level from K-12. We have three tiers of instruction. Tier One is concerned with the basic core curriculum. We utilize a model widely used in Asian primary schools and supported by the effective school research in our own country. Tier Two incorporates the “Foxfire Model,” which involves highly interactive, student-designed work projects and Tier Three requires “Community Involvement” activities.

A parent sitting at the back of the room called out a little belligerently, “Why are you using this Asian Model in America? American kids are unique.”

Ms. Kelly responded thoughtfully, “Yes, I understand what you’re saying. Many of us felt the same way. However, researchers who studied why Asian students consistently outperform American students made insightful recommendations that we have adopted. We have been very happy with the results.

“The Asian Model is basically a highly effective, well-coordinated system designed to deliver quality education to the broadest spectrum of students. The ‘miracle’ of Asian educational achievement, like their economic achievement, stems from a belief that accomplishment depends on effort and hard work. In the United States we believe that innate ability determines how well or how much one learns. Believing that all children can learn effectively if they are taught well and work hard, Asian countries have been able to raise the level of achievement for all their children, not just an elite minority.

“Asian teachers believe it is their responsibility to give their children a common educational experience and to make sure that certain basic information and fundamental skills are acquired by all children. They state that if schools provide different experiences to different children, inequalities will later make it difficult for some of them to compete for jobs. And sadly, this is what has happened in many American schools: a privileged elite of students receive excellent education while greater numbers are ill-prepared for life in contemporary society.

“The Asian Model has a core curriculum that is straightforward and concise. Students, parents and teachers all know what the child must master at each grade level. American textbooks and curriculum are too detailed and complicated. The same material is often repeated and reviewed year after year. In the Asian Model there is no time wasted with ‘spiral learning.’ The student is responsible for learning specific material in a given year and building on that the next.

“The school day is also organized to enhance the quality of lessons. Students are alert and able to concentrate because they have frequent breaks. Teachers have adequate time for preparation and collegial collaboration; their lessons naturally become more lively and engaging. Routines are well established and clear, so time is not wasted going from one task to another.

“The Asian Model builds a highly supportive social structure that is conducive to learning. Classes use cooperative learning activities and peer tutoring. Because learning is viewed as a process based on effort, mistakes are not considered negative or indicative of inferior innate ability. If you want to learn, you have to make mistakes. Classes, therefore, are heterogenous with no tracking and little need for costly special education. By rewarding effort and hard work, teachers help students develop internal discipline, perseverance and self-esteem. Nurtured in this way, they are better equipped to build their lives and contribute to society’s development.”

Eduardo Hidalgo, head of the Parents Association, spoke up. “The supportive and involved family is also a crucial element in the Asian Model used here at the school. We parents have to arrange a specific time and place in our home for our children to work. Together with the school, we try to get the kids to understand that it is their responsibility to learn; that they can’t blame anyone else if they don’t. We want them to feel accountable. The family, school and community must do everything possible to support learning and show how much we value education. After hearing that children in Asian homes spend less time doing household chores, I started easing up on my son. Now he has a half-hour more to spend on his homework. I also started getting him more books to read when they told me that in Beijing even poor children own an average of 114 books.”

Elsa Fernandez raised her hand to speak. “At a parent workshop last month, we talked about how little we American parents expect from our children. A study showed that even when American students don’t do well in school, parents still say they are pleased with their progress, while Asian parents feel their children can always do better if they work a little harder. I think that when we expect less from our children, we get less. For example, when my oldest son was in the neighborhood elementary school he was put in a slower class because he didn’t score well on some reading test. When he came here, there were no special classes. I was told that my son had to work hard and if he did he would learn. It’s amazing how well he is doing. Now if he tells me some other kids are smarter, I just say that means he has to work harder.”

“We agree completely,” Ms. Kelly said. “Now I would like you to see the students in action. Media Studies is almost over and Work Project Hour will soon begin. Let’s take a tour and see some student activities.”

As they entered the auditorium, several classes were leaving. Mrs. Gomez, the media coordinator, stopped to explain the school’s media program. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a well-produced documentary is worth a million. There is so much exciting material available which relates to our curriculum. We gather two or three classes at a time to see films, videos, and documentaries, then break down into small discussion or work groups. The students love it. This program also helps us give teachers time for collaborative planning.”

The tour stopped outside of some classrooms. “As part of the Tier Two Work Project Program,” Ms. Kelly explained, “each class is responsible for at least one highly polished annual project. This fifth grade class is creating a bibliography of children’s literature set in our city. Some eighth graders are collecting neighborhood folklore and a ninth grade class is preparing a museum exhibit entitled, ‘Life in Our Neighborhood during the Early 19th Century.’ These projects are important because students learn self-motivation, creativity, and responsibility.

“Our Tier Three ‘Community Involvement’ activities begin in Kindergarten with the class as community. The concept of community is gradually expanded to include the school, the neighborhood, the city, the surrounding suburban areas, the state, the nation and ultimately the world. These community activities are developmental. First, students are exposed to the city and its resources. We next teach students how to use these resources or take part in activities like AIDS Walks. We then expect community service to broaden to a commitment which is self-motivated and leading towards determined action for change.

Serena’s orientation ended where it had begun, under the banner “The Value Creation School: DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR OUR CITY.” She felt happy as she left, applications in hand. Her two boys chatted excitedly about what they had seen. A feeling of confidence and hope stirred again inside of Serena. “They’re already starting to change,” she thought. “Maybe our renaissance is about to begin.”

SUMMARY

*The Value Creation School with its motto, “Developing Leaders for Our City,” will generate a well-spring of educated, responsible young leaders with a thorough understanding of our city’s heritage who are committed to realizing our city’s role as a vital international city. Just as the Renaissance awakened the human spirit through a rebirth of learning and culture, The Value Creation School, through its innovative methods and curriculum, will foster the inner-motivated citizens willing and able to initiate and lead the creation of new value in our city. The Value Creation School is based on the conviction that a change in the destiny of a single individual can lead to a change in the destiny of a community, a nation, and ultimately humankind itself. We believe that there is no force for reformation and regeneration more powerful than such educated and awakened individuals.*

*The Value Creation School will make the study of our city the central unifying and integrating focus of our students’ educational experience. By relating academic subjects to the land, history, technological development, cultural and economic structures of the city, students will gain “living knowledge” that is meaningful and useful. A coordinated instructional program will relate traditional study areas to the analysis, understanding, and appreciation of the interrelated factors that helped create the city of today. Project-driven, integrated studies will focus on the many local, regional and global concerns that face these young people as they prepare to become the leaders of tomorrow. Its K-12, multi-ethnic, heterogeneous student population will be a microcosm of our city.*

*The Value Creation School will utilize an innovative “Three-Tiered” instructional approach.*

*TIER ONE is a modified and expanded “Asian Primary Model.” Because it emphasizes “effort” rather than “innate ability,” students are grouped heterogeneously with less need for special education. It stresses the process rather than the end result of learning; it views errors as a positive part of that process; and it values critical thinking and student-generated questions. This model encourages a stable, supportive and strong social structure and discourages anonymity. Teachers stay with the same students for 2 or 3 years. The basic curriculum is clear, precise and non-cyclical at each grade level. Students, parents and teachers know what is expected at all times. All students have school chores. An extended day and innovative scheduling allow frequent breaks for students and collaborative planning time for teachers. This results in more engaging, well-planned lessons with improved concentration and time-on-task.*

*TIER TWO utilizes “The Foxfire Model” and involves highly interactive, student-designed work projects which cultivate self-motivation, creativity, and group process skills.*

*TIER THREE requires “Community Involvement” activities at varying levels of exposure, participation, service and commitment. Kindergarten students work inside their class. The concept of “community” gradually expands to the national and international community in upper grades.*

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*The Value Creation School will encompass grades K-12. This is a well proven model in private schools but rarely available to public school families.*

*The Value Creation School will be firmly rooted in its community. Therefore seventy percent of its student body will be drawn from the neighborhood. The Value Creation School will provide a supportive learning environment for positive interaction and exchange among students from multicultural backgrounds. Thirty percent of its student body will come from outside the neighborhood to provide a cross-section of the ethnic diversity of our city. It will also be a link to the economic structure of the community with some of its student body recruited from families who work, but do not live, in the neighborhood of the school, thus enabling these parents to participate more fully in their children’s school life.*

*The Value Creation School will select students who show an interest in and commitment to the ideals and goals of the school, as demonstrated by a family tour of the school and the completion of an application. Interested families will be guaranteed the opportunity to meet at length with representative of the staff who will explain the school’s program at length. Fifty percent of available spaces will be randomly assigned to applicants at each grade level. The remaining seats will be filled by siblings of currently attending students, children whose attendance will help build a culturally diversified and heterogeneous student population, and students who are drawn from overcrowded district schools.*

*The Value Creation School will ask parents, students, staff and community residents to monitor and evaluate student progress and the quality of school life. The school will continually revise its program on the basis of these findings. Student academic progress and mastery of curriculum will be assessed with objective as well as process-oriented measures. A committee of staff members will carefully certify each student’s academic achievement and personal development and prepare detailed student assessments for the purpose of college and work recommendations. The services of this office will continue far beyond graduation to encourage continued lifelong learning.*

*The Value Creation School considers staff interaction and collaboration a crucial element of its program, and will therefore allocate the time and space necessary to make this feasible. For each cluster there will be a room that will contain computers, books, filing space, etc. and which will be designed so teachers and parents can work together to plan, discuss and perfect their program.*

*In The Value Creation School teachers will not be isolated in their classrooms, but will have more opportunities for collegial work through daily conferences with other staff members from various disciplines and grade levels. The school hopes to create an extended school day program and to reorganize programs to allow more time for preparation, student/teacher conferencing and joint teacher interaction.*

*The Value Creation School will have a governing body consisting of parents, students, faculty and community resource people. The school will be headed by a principal dedicated to the ideals and goals of the school, who is non-authoritarian, a team player who can respect and work together with the governing body, individual staff members and students. In recognition of the student’s development as the primary point of the school, the principal will have teaching responsibilities as well. He or she should have a mind broad enough and a heart big enough to embrace, nurture and influence the positive growth of students, staff and community. By his or her own example of concerned, effective, intelligent leadership, the principal will embody the characteristics that the school is trying to foster as it develops capable leaders for ourcCity’s future.*

*The Value Creation School’s Planning Team consisted of an ad hoc committee of public school teachers called “The Committee of Concerned Educators.” This Committee met for two years to discuss practical solutions to the crisis in public education. In 1991 the Committee submitted a position paper to state and city educational authorities entitled, “Creating Value in Education during a Time of Fiscal Restraint.” The Committee members represented a broad spectrum of grade levels K-12, subject licenses, teaching experience, and ethnic, educational, work and social backgrounds.*